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ABSTRACT

Conflicting information has made it necessary to examine the key factors involved in submitting magazine nonfiction for publication in order to provide better insight into the mechanics of magazine acceptance. A preliminary study tested the applicability of the market systems approach from the perspective of the magazine editor. Subjects, 28 editors of major United States magazines, were interviewed and their remarks were coded by content analysis. Thirty trade books on freelance writing were also examined. Findings suggest that (1) existing information on magazine freelancing is unreliable; (2) magazine freelancing is best viewed as a business enterprise; and (3) an appropriate and complete approach to investigations of freelancing is one derived from business research, the market systems approach. (Seven tables of data are included, and 38 references are appended.) (MS)

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Magazine Freelancing as a Business Enterprise: A Market Systems Approach

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Magazine Freelancing as a Business Enterprise:
A Market Systems Approach

Abstract

This paper addresses some of the conflicting information gleaned from trade publications on freelancing for magazines. Interviews with editors from 28 major U.S. magazines indicate the extent of the gap between theory and practice. The results suggest that a market systems approach can comfortably encompass all the major elements of freelance activity directed toward magazine editors.

Magazine Freelancing as a Business Enterprise: A Market Systems Approach

Abstract

This paper examines the key factors involved in submitting magazine nonfiction for publication. Much of the recent trade press literature on the subject provides incomplete and conflicting information on the subject. A review of 30 books published over the last two decades reveals considerable disparity in the authors' experience, as well as marketing information and conclusions about the freelancing business. For example, although most books appear to value the query letter as an effective marketing tool, no two give the same description of a query letter. There is a distinct lack of objective research in the area that would provide better insight into the mechanics of magazine acceptance.

An approach proposed here is the market systems approach introduced by Adler and modified by Stanton. From this perspective, the product (magazine article) and the marketing of it are not separate elements. Rather, the product is developed after marketing research has indicated a specific or potential need.

A preliminary study was performed to test the applicability of this approach from the perspective of the magazine editor. It involved 28 editors of major U.S. magazines who attended annual ASJA meetings in New York City from 1985 to 1987. Content analysis of these talks provided information about marketing of magazine articles. Results are summarized and directions for further research in this area are suggested.

Magazine Freelancing as a Business Enterprise:
A Market Systems Approach

Introduction

Several studies have been published that examine the key individuals and the flow of information that is characteristic of newspaper reporting (see, for example, Atwood, 1970; Popovich, 1975,; Tichenor et al, 1980; and Atkin et al, 1983). However, studies that define and interpret the means by which magazine nonfiction is accepted for publication are absent from the research literature.

Over the past two decades, a large number of trade press books have addressed the means by which magazine nonfiction gets into print. These books typically claim to help novice writers succeed in the magazine freelancing business. Often the authors of these popular press books have limited experience or inappropriate credentials; most give little attention to the important topic of selling one's writing; none base their conclusions on the support of an experimental method. Because so much conflicting information is offered, there is altogether too much previous writing on this subject in the trade press.

This research first reviews the trade press literature on freelancing. A market systems perspective on magazine freelancing as a business enterprise is then suggested and a preliminary study made, using a content analysis of talks with 28 editors of major magazines, to test the usefulness of the

proposed market systems approach.

Freelancing Books in the Trade Press

Examination of a sampling of trade press books identifies problems with authors' experience, marketing information, and conflicting conclusions about the freelance business. (This sampling was accomplished by visiting three local public libraries and examining all books on freelancing published since 1970, an inelegant but effective means of sampling typical works available on the subject.)

Several authors of freelance writing books carry a credential like a university teaching position, without any specified experience or research into nonfiction article selection criteria (Graham, 1980; Hughes, 1979; Nelson, 1978). Other authors say they are former freelancers (Rivers, 1976) or former editors (Meyer, 1982). Some claim to have huge previous publications records, which on closer scrutiny turn out to be padded with newspaper writing credits, which are much more easily achieved (cf Young, 1983). Burgett's (1984) biographical sketch notes "over 900 items in print;" the text, however, suggests that many of his publications are not in magazines but in the newspapers.

Other trade press books are the work of freelance writers of some renown (American Society of Journalists and Authors [ASJA], 1983; Cassill, 1981; Emerson, 1981). Editors, too, offer advice to novice writers (Spikol, 1979; Vachon, 1979), but so do ski buffs (Casewit, 1974), sci-fi pulp novelists (Goldin & Sky, 1982), a "veteran New York literary agent" (MacCampbell, 1978), the author of one book (Earth Shelters, Martindale, 1978), and a

couple who have "written textbooks" (Gearing & Brunson, 1977). Table 1 provides a summary of authors' credentials.

Of the 30 trade books examined, only one placed an appreciable emphasis on query letters. Gordon Burgett (1985) devoted 25 percent of his book to queries (and about the same amount to cover letters). The next greatest amount of emphasis came from Graham (1980) and Burgett (1984), with 8 percent of their books devoted to queries. Martindale's (1978) and Boeschen's (1982) books follow, with 6 percent given over to queries.

Of the remaining 25 books examined, less than one percent of the total space was devoted to queries and how to write them. Table 2 gives a detailed breakdown of the marketing information in each book.

Needless to say, such a mixed collection of advisors offers equally mixed advice. Some suggest sending completed manuscripts (Bernstein, 1986; Goldin & Sky, 1982; Casewit, 1974); others say writers should never complete an article at all without a firm commitment to purchase and publish from an editor (ASJA, 1983). Some suggest querying story ideas on the phone (Emerson, 1981); others suggest querying in person (Cassill, 1981; Martindale, 1978; Casewit, 1974). Two suggest making "whirlwind trips to New York (to) get enough assignments for the whole year" (Cassill, 1981; Rivers, 1976).

The most common marketing device of the freelance writer is a query letter. Of the 30 books examined, 20 suggest sending a query, but no two give the same description of a query letter. For some, a prescribed format is important (ASJA, 1983; Martindale, 1978; Nelson, 1978); for others, a prescribed format is an

Table 1. Author's Credentials

Adams (1984)	3 books, 9+ major mags listed
ASJA (1983)	At least 2 books or 8 articles; professional writer's assn.
Bernstein (1986)	4 books
Boeschen (1982)	4+ mags listed; teaches
Burgett (1985)	"More than 900 articles in print"
Burgett (1984)	"More than 900 items in print"
Casewit (1974)	"Writes books on skiing"
Cassill (1981)	30+ mags; ASJA member; teaches
Edwards (1984)	6 books, "more than 150 articles"
Edwards and Bower (1984)	No credits given; labelled "National Writers School"
Emerson (1983)	2 books, "more than 150" articles
Emerson (1981)	"More than 150 articles"
Gage and Hibsch Coppess (1986)	4 mags named "and numerous other magazines"
Gearing and Brunson (1977)	Have "written textbooks"
Golding and Sky (1982)	Sci-fi pulp writers
Graham (1980)	Journalism professor, Georgia State
Hughes (1979)	Journalism professor, Georgetown
MacCampbell (1978)	"A veteran New York literary agent"
Martindale (1978)	1 book (*Earth Shelters*), "numerous" mag articles
Mau (1981)	"A successful freelance writer;" "business and technical"
Meyer (1982)	Former Harcourt editor, now professor at Rice
Nelson (1978)	Professor, U of Oregon
Peterson and Kesselman-Turkel (1987)	"Over 1000 articles for national magazines"
Rivers (1976)	Professor, Stanford; "former freelancer"
Spikol (1979)	Magazine editor
Spinrad (1983)	Sci-fi writer
Tarshis (1982)	15 books, 5 mags listed; professor at Fairfield
Vachon (1979)	Editor of Vermont Life magazine, professor at Vermont
Wilbur (1987)	2 books on writing/freelancing
Young (1983)	3 books; "over 400" articles; lists many newspaper credits

Table 2. Emphasis on Query Letters in Popular Press Writing Books

	Page #s. General Marketing	Page #s. Market Analysis	Page #s. Writing Queries	Total Pages in Books	Percent Devoted to Querying
Adams (1984)	—	96-99	—	143	0%
ASJA (1983)	102-108	—	108-114	827	less than 1%
Bernstein (1986)	24-31; 69-74; 105; 122-141; 149-152	108-109;111-113	110; 114	161	1%
Boeschen (1982)	39	—	42-50	158	6%
Burgett (1985)	65-75; 110-113	12	17-64; 81-84	203	25%
Burgett (1984)	16-30; 35	55-57; 63-76; 80-82	93-109	199	8%
Casewit (1974)	—	—	—	—	—
Cassill (1981)	161-162	51-69	116	321	less than 1%
Edwards (1984)	—	—	—	187	0%
Edwards and Bower (1984)	35-37	51-58	70-71	116	2%
Emerson (1983)	—	8-10	—	251	less than 1%
Emerson (1981)	1-219	—	7-8	219	less than 1%
Gage and Hibsch Coppess (1986)	3-13	31-32	22-37	510	3%
Gearing and Brunson (1977)	—	—	—	—	—
Goldin and Sky (1982)	—	—	43-45	298	less than 1%
Graham (1980)	—	—	60-76	208	8%
Hughes (1979)	—	135-136; 139-140	121-122; 132; 270	278	1.5%
MacCampbell (1978)	11-14	—	66-70	118	3%
Martindale (1978)	37; 41-42	140-149	50-62	211	6%
Mau (1981)	37; 40-42	123-125	120-121	244	less than 1%
Meyer (1982)	—	—	32	269	less than 1%
Nelson (1978)	85-110	111-112	112-121	401	2%
Peterson and Kesselman-Turkel (1987)	136-149	18-36	121-135	273	5%
Rivers (1976)	—	6-14	134-138	273	1.5%
Spikol (1979)	—	—	21-27	247	2%
Spinrad (1983)	41-72	—	—	162	0%
Tarshis (1982)	—	174-179	179-182	182	1.5%
Vachon (1979)	53-66; 185-193	—	38-42; 86-87	193	3%
Wilbur (1987)	195-203 (list of publishers; no annotations)	—	—	214	0%
Young (1983)	35	—	14-19	148	3%

anathema, the surest way to get a rejection slip (Spikol, 1979).

Ten writers agreed that the query letter should begin with a sample lead for the proposed article; 15 noted that the query writer's credentials should be presented in the letter; and 13 said a precis or summary of the article idea was necessary. Of the 30 books, only 13 gave examples of a query letter and only nine gave more than a single example. Burgett (1985) gave the largest number of examples but used only his own letter samples, with no apparent interest in variation. Nine authors who advised writing a query letter gave no example at all. No two agreed on the essential elements of a query letter. A complete listing of other elements suggested by these authors as important to a query is given in Table 3.

The results of the review of these books highlight the central problem: What is now known about magazine article marketing is at best written from the limited perspectives of individual experiences in the field. At worst, this information is offered by individuals without experience in the field. An objective overview of the magazine freelance business is needed and research based on that overview may provide better insight into the mechanics of article acceptance.

A Market Systems Perspective

In order to apply a market systems approach to magazine freelancing, it is first necessary to view freelance writing as a business and the writer as the sole proprietor of that business. The writer sells articles to a magazine editor, who repackages them for sale to the general public as part of a magazine.

Table 3. Querying Advice by Trade Press Authors

	Form	In person	By phone	By letter	Letter with unsolicited MS	Letter with clips	Proposal	Via agent	**Packaging**	Loose pgs/unstapled	Typed	Bond paper	Neat	Pica type	Letterhead	Postage or SASE	**Format**	Prescribed format for query letter	Lead from article	Summary of article idea	Writer's qualifications	Sales pitch	Outline of proposed article	Mention of unique sources	**Other Factors**	Brevity	Slant, angle, focus	Relevance to market	Timeliness	Use of magazine guidelines	Correct editor's name, spelling	Work "on spec"?	Simultaneous submissions?	# of sample letters
Adams (1984)							•																			•								0
ASJA (1983)				•						•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•			•	N		1
Bernstein (1986)					•																											N		0
Boeschen (1982)				•								•		•	•	•			•	•				•		•	•				•	Y		1
Burgett (1985)				•							•	•	•			•		•	•	•			•	•		•				•	Y		10
Burgett (1984)				•															•	•	•	•					•		•				Y	2
Casewit (1974)		•		•	•														•		•		•			•	•		•	•	•	Y		—
Cassill (1981)		•		•											•	•										•							Y	0
Edwards (1984)																																		0
Edwards and Bower (1984)				•											•	•					•	•								•	•		Y	0
Emerson (1983)												•				•				•	•		•											0
Emerson (1981)			•	•															•		•			•				•		•				0
Gage and Hibsch Coppess (1986)				•		•	•				•	•			•	•		•	•	•	•		•										N	5
Gearing and Brunson (1977)					•		•														•													—
Goldin and Sky (1982)					•					•	•		•			•					•					•							Y	0
Graham (1980)				•		•					•		•						•	•	•			•			•							8
Hughes (1979)				•		•														•	•							•	•					0
MacCampbell (1978)				•							•					•					•													—
Martindale (1978)		•		•							•		•		•	•		•	•	•	•					•	•	•	•		•			3
Mau (1981)				•																													Y	0
Meyer (1982)				•																														0
Nelson (1978)				•	•						•	•	•			•		•		•	•	•		•			•	•	•				Y	2
Peterson and Kesselman-Turkel (1987)						•					•		•			•		•		•		•		•		•	•	•			•			5
Rivers (1976)				•	•																					•								5
Spikol (1979)						•												•										•						1
Spinrad (1983)																																		0
Tarshis (1982)				•		•														•		•		•		•	•							1
Vachon (1979)																			•	•	•									•				0
Wilbur (1987)				•		•	•															•				•							Y	0
Young (1983)				•												•										•	•				•			2

The chief requirements for small business success are that the proprietor(s) be able to produce a product and be able to sell it (Small Business Administration [SBA], 1980).

The systems approach to marketing was introduced by Adler (1967) and, as used here, expanded by Stanton (1981). Adler suggested not only that marketing be viewed in terms of the whole activity of a company, but that business "success is ... synonymous with marketing success." Thus, from a market systems perspective, the product and the marketing of it are not separate elements; the product is part of the marketing plan, developed after marketing research indicates a need for it.

Stanton (1981) outlines the elements of a market systems approach as follows:

> A company creates a product for a target market, sometimes using intermediaries such as marketing representatives or support services; this company operates within environmental constraints. Important aspects of the company's performance are its personnel capability, financial resources, market research, and resultant marketing mix (product, price, promotion, and distribution). The elements of the product that influence its success are its planning and development, well-identified product features, market demand for this product, packaging, and feasibility of production.
>
> The target market may be industrial/business users who use the product to fabricate their own product or ultimate consumers. The industrial/business consumer is knowledgable and generally buys to meet corporate goals. The ultimate consumer buys to meet personal goals or desires.
>
> Environmental constraints on a company may be economic, spring from current lifestyles and values, or relate to major social problems, the political or legal climate, new technology, and, perhaps most important, the competition.

Stanton's framework is applied very easily to the magazine freelance business. A company (the writer) must have the personal ability to write and market magazine articles, and the financial resources to accomplish this before receiving income

from their sale. Market research must be done to learn what the competition is producing and how to outperform others. Promotion of the product occurs via query letter, and distribution as Stanton defines it (reaching the right market at the right time) is critical.

The product is the proposed magazine article. Planning and development occur before the product is produced, to assure that it will be innovative and fresh. Well-identified product features enable the writer to convince an editor that this product is new and of compelling interest. Market demand for this product has been established by the market research and careful targetting of the audience. The writer packages the article on a clean PC printout with accompanying disk, photos, source list, etc., but the ultimate packaging is placement in a magazine. Before offering the product for sale, the writer has tested the feasibility of producing it: new information is available, the sources have agreed to interviews, and enough material has been identified to fill the number of pages this magazine typically uses.

The target market is an editor, well-acquainted with the magazine's audience, with a need to fill upcoming magazine story lists. The ultimate consumers will be the magazine's subscribers; the writer will be acquainted through marketing research with the audience's demographics.

The environmental constraint most influential on the writer is likely to be the competition. Most magazines accept less than 0.1% of the article ideas submitted to them (ASJA, 1983). Other environmental constraints, such as social problems and political

events, may affect the relative value of the subject matter or influence the writer's ability to produce a timely product.

Thus, when the market systems approach is applied to freelance writing, it appears to encompass the major elements of freelance marketing activity.

Preliminary Study

A preliminary study was performed to test the use of this framework as a means of learning more about magazine freelancing. The market systems outline developed by Stanton (1981) was used for categorizing information about freelancing gathered from taped talks by 28 editors of major U.S. magazines. These talks occurred during annual ASJA meetings in New York City from 1985 to 1988.

Content analysis was performed using the clause as the basic unit of information; where the use of this unit created categorization ambiguity (Holsti, 1969), the subject of the noun-verb pair was selected as the primary item for coding. Irrelevant remarks (for example, about taperecording logistics) were not coded. Three coders were provided with written coding instructions and two samples; intercoder reliability was 87%.

Editors providing information were affiliated with the following magazines: American Health, Boston, Crane's New York Business, Family Circle, Fine Homes, Glamour, Ladies' Home Journal, McCall's, Nation's Business, New Woman, New York, Newsday, Omni, Parents, Physician's Management, Private Practice, Reader's Digest, Redbook, Self, Success, Travel & Leisure, Venture, and Woman's Day.

Results showed, first, that information about magazine freelancing fits well into a marketing systems framework -- that freelancing is appropriately treated as a business. Only two clauses about freelance writing fell outside the categories and were coded as "other."

The greatest number of comments editors made were not about the mechanics of writing a query letter, but about market research: learning about the magazine and its competitors before querying an article idea (14%). The other areas most frequently the subject of comments were attributes of the target market (13.6%), promotional material (13.5%), well-identified product features (11.8%), personal capabilities (11.5%), and product planning and development (8.8%).

The following paragraphs summarize the editors' comments about each of the five major elements in the market systems model: the company, the product, the target market, intermediaries, and the business environment.

The Company/the Writer

Editors expect good writers who demonstrate that they have researched their subject when offering a new, timely product in a query letter. Market research is strongly urged, particularly knowledge of the target magazine. Content analysis of the editors' comments in this area is quite clear: evidence of preliminary research is a heavily weighted factor, as is shown in Table 4.

Table 4.
Results of Content Analysis: The Company

Capabilities
- able to write well (6)
- integrity; accuracy (4)
- reliability (4)
- cooperativeness (4)

Marketing Mix: Promotions
- convince editor story idea is good (8)
- show preliminary research (7)
- use query letter or proposal (6)
- prove you can write well (3)
- give your credentials (3)
- show your attitude toward the material, your slant (3)
- offer new idea or new research (3)

Marketing Mix: Packaging
- include clips of previous work (4)
- keep query brief (2-4 pp) (3)
- don't telephone (3)
- make it neat, cleanly typed (3)

Marketing Mix: Price
- magazines use freelancers to save money (4)

Distribution
- send timely, fresh ideas (12)
- be sure idea will be timely when printed in 3-4 months (3)

Market Research (pre-product)
- know the magazine you want to write for (17)
- know the magazine's competition (5)

The Product

The participating editors had numerous comments on planning and development of articles and the product features they would like writers to include. They touched more briefly on the market demand for articles, usually mentioning specific needs their publication had at the time of the discussion, such as "art of living" features. Content analysis of comments in this area reinforce the weighting of preliminary research; editors do not care to receive queries on subjects they or their competitors have already published. (See Table 5.)

Target Market

Editors described their work and their needs much as Stanton (1981) described the buying motives of other industrial/business target markets: editors make rationally motivated purchase decisions based on the needs of their companies. A third of the editors in this study described their secondary target markets, the readers, in terms of specific demographics. Table 6 briefly notes their most frequent comments.

Intermediaries

Although intermediaries play an important role in some businesses, the editors in the survey **did not mention** intermediaries in the freelancing business, generally literary agents. This should be of interest to hopeful writers who consider sending samples of their efforts to "agents" who critique for a fee. Agents are primarily a fixture of the world of book publishing, where the written product will generate enough income to make the agent's percentage worth the marketing and negotiating effort.

Table 5.
Results of Content Analysis: The Product

Planning and Development
- find a new slant, be original (15)
- be well-prepared, flesh out your idea (7)
- tie your research to personal experiences or the human aspect of the story (3)

Well-identified Product Features
- quality of writing (13), especially good storytelling (4)
- accurate, balanced reporting (8)

Market Demand for the Product
- editor's publication buys more than 50% from freelancers (6)
- article must have broad, national appeal (3)

Test Feasibility of Producing
- make sure story exists; make sure you (writer) can get the story (5)

Table 6.
Results of Content Analysis: The Target Market

Industrial/Business User
- busy (5)
- under commercial/profitmaking pressures (5)
- need story ideas (7)
- see freelancers as a risk (4)

Ultimate Consumer
- gave magazine's demographics (9)

Business Environment

The primary subject of discussion in this category was the intense competition among writers; as one editor put it, "editors today can choose among writers of all kinds, descriptions, ages, backgrounds, and points of view." The competition is typically assigned to groups reflecting the editor's familiarity with (published) work: staff writers, known writers, book writers (whose work can be excerpted), and the many "unknowns."

Table 7.
Results of Content Analysis: The Environment

Competition
- uses staff writers (5)
- prefers known writers (3)
- gets hundreds of queries from unknowns (8)

Other

Only two comments were made which could not be coded into the above categories; the first was that a writer must expect rejection and the second that to be an economic success, a writer must resell articles and article research, rather than using that work only once.

Discussion

The results of this preliminary study suggest that existing information on magazine freelancing is unreliable, that magazine freelancing is best viewed as a business enterprise, and that an appropriate and complete approach to investigations of freelancing is one derived from business research: the market systems

approach.

Further research is also needed, to test the broader applicability of the information collected from this group of editors. However, several key factors in freelancing success are identified:

- research the magazine and its competitors before querying
- respond to the magazine's readership; write appropriately for its audience
- propose timely, fresh ideas
- find a new slant on a popular topic
- polish your writing
- be prepared to meet intense competition.

The practical applications of research in this area are clear. The number of books in print on freelance writing attest to the time, energy, and resources spent in pursuit of success in this field. Any work that could more definitively describe the mechanics of the freelance writing business would be of value.

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